

Castlemaine Naturalist

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A Dawn Cruise on Lake Argyle

This was the way we started a B.O.C.A. trip last year. Lake Argyle is Australia's largest body of fresh water and was formed by the damming of the Ord River in 1972.

Cradled by the spectacular Carr Boyd Ranges in the East Kimberly of far north Western Australia, this vast expanse of blue water set against massive red cliffs creates scenery that is breathtaking.

It has over 70 islands which were once tops of ranges, and are now homes to a variety of marsupials and reptiles, including Fresh-water Crocodiles.

It has the only known deposits of Zebra Rock in the world. It is a sanctuary for 265 species of birds, which at times number in the thousands.

From 5am 'til nearly midday on board the new M.V. Bower Bird we nosed our way around riverine habitats, through extensive wet lands, positively reeling at the bird life; so many new species for most of us!

The boat was quiet and smooth and we had excellent views of Yellow Chats, Black-necked Storks, Bustards, incredible numbers of migrating waders, Wood Sandpipers, Short-tailed Sandpipers, Wandering and Plumed Whistling Ducks, scores of Comb-crested Jacanas on the water and land, some with chicks - such big feet for little chicks! - White-browed Crakes and so on, and so on.

We hugged the cliffs and saw White-quilled Rock Pigeons, Sandstone Shrike-thrush, as well as a Short-eared Rock Wallaby with his distinctive tail.

We walked around a small wooded island - Purple-crowned Fairy-wrens, Swamp Hens by the hundreds, White-bellied Sea Eagles

overhead.....

There was a continuous smorgasbord of food, fresh fruits (all grown at Kunanurra), stacks of buttered fruit loaf, iced drinks, tea, coffee.

As we droned back the 40kms to Kununurra through the spectacular scenery, I thought, 'Well, if I don't go any further, it was worth it just for those six magic hours.'

Maggie Oliver.

A Mid-Winter Camp in the Mallee

No rain was forecast and disregarding a keen wind and lightly clouded sky it was all systems go heading up the Calder through Ouyen to a weekend birding camp with the RAOU Vic. group in the Sunset Country.

Turning off the bitumen at Walpeup onto Meridian Road brings you to the Honeymoon Track, then the Mopoke Track. This is the Mallee as it used to be for endless miles, full of diversity, a botanical and zoological garden; ephemeral saltbush lake beds alongside clearings thick underfoot with dried everlastings in the midst of spinifex and mallee. Outside was the sobering contrast of bare wheatfields like an open seascape taking your eye straight to a treeless horizon, inside, the Belah casuarina and the Cyprus pines (Slender, and White) attracted their own birds. Hakea wattle and Wallowa wattle were in full bud preparatory to flowering and Mallee eucalypt species were far more mixed than realized, until after attempting to separate Grey mallee from Oil mallee from Yorrell from Square-fruited mallee.

Mallee Ring-necked Parrots were sighted first and from then on, perhaps because of their sedate, leisurely nature, they never seemed far away from the campsite. On occasions it was quiet with few birds calling and then a wave of honeyeaters, mostly Yellow-plumed; then Brown-headed, White-fronted, and some White-eared, joined by Pardalotes - Spotted, Striated and Yellow-rumped - took control of the flowering Mallee until driven out by non-stop talking Spiny-cheeked Honeyeaters.

My notes of favoured sightings takes in Grey Butcher-bird, Stubble Quail, Yellow-throated Miners, a grey flash of passing Cockatiels, Emus (not ones behind fences!), Wedgetailed Eagles, Blue Bonnets, 'Neophemas' - possibly Blue-winged, or even Elegant - Red-capped and Hooded Robins, a few Splendid Wrens in eclipse, Shy Hylacola, Weebills with four species of thornbills, including Chestnut-rumped, Black-capped Sitellas, Rufous and Golden Whistlers, Common Bronzewing, Horsfield's Bronze-cuckoo, White-browed Babblers and a Mallee-fowl mound (located with the help of a GPS user).

But the highlights came at the end: 20 or so Regent Parrots in fast moving smokey-gold flights, then Mulga Parrots around the stands of Callitris and a pair of nesting Barking Owls. Then the final reward of a pair of Major Mitchell enlarging a nest hollow; they were completely indifferent to the audience as the noise, more akin to woodpeckers, drew us from afar.

Given the company of birdoes around a large campfire it proved possible even in mid-winter to put up with darkness at 5.30 and an iced-over washing-up bucket by morning!

Chris. Morris

Birds at 61 Hunter Street, June '96

With the onset of the frosty weather there are few small birds around our area. Yellow-rumped Thornbills occasionally, and the Eastern Spinebills and New Holland Honeyeaters are still visiting the Banksia marginata and grevillias. A Grey Fantail and Goldfinches have been at the birdbath, and on another occasion three Grey Shrike-thrushes were "playing chasey" among the fruit trees.

Across the road in the garden at "Buda" the Pied Currawongs are calling, along with magpies and a Kookaburra. One evening in the large gum small flocks of Long-billed Corellas and Galahs were squabbling for roosting rights. The Galahs won, and the corellas flew off.

Red Wattlebirds, Blackbirds and Crimson and Eastern Rosellas are still with us, but on the whole it is a very quiet month.

Shirley Parnaby

Foxes

Sutton Grange Landcare ran its first Fox Off (1080 poisoned bait) campaign from mid-April to Mid-May. About 1400 baits were laid and there are informal reports of approximately 800 baits being taken. The number of baits taken roughly equated the estimated fox population of the area.

However! Spotlight counts in January over 170km gave a count of 48 foxes seen. In June the number was 42 over the same route! Although it may be easier to spot foxes now because the adults are seeking mates, it is still a surprising result.

On the same spotlight routes, cats were also counted. In January 3 were sighted, in June, 4.

Marg. Hunter

Assessing our Flora

Over the years, members of the Castlemaine Field Naturalists have made many observations, to help document our flora. We have little record however, of *changes* that are taking place. Some changes are rapid, others a slow and gradual.

Two strategies to help build up a picture of change are proposed.

Photo points

The aim is to take photographs at selected points. Additional photographs, taken in later years, will help show changes that occur.

Anyone with a camera can take part. View points should be chosen so that additional photographs can readily be taken from the same place. View Points could be in built-up areas, in farmland, in re-vegetation areas, or in bushland. They could be in valleys, or along streams, or on plains, or on hill tops - the greater the variety the better.

Some documentation is needed. Write this in your note-book and on the back of the photograph. This should include location, the direction, and the date and time, the focal length of the lens (this is usually written on the front of the lens, and is important information for those taking photographs at a later time), and the name of the photographer.

CFNC could perhaps also store the negatives, so that additional prints could be made in years to come.

Twenty people taking five photographs each would give a hundred photo-points. It would make an invaluable resource, and be a great start to the project.

Quadrats

Assessment of vegetation using quadrats is becoming an increasingly common practice. Several methods are used. The method described here is a typical.

A 30 metre by 30 metre square area is selected. Selection of the area can be at random, but more often, a typical sample of the vegetation community is selected.

Usually, a corner is chosen, and the other corners determined by using a compass, with the sides pointing north-south and east-west, and a tape measure.

A census of all plants occurring in the quadrat is then made. Plants are counted if the canopy overtops the quadrat, even if the trunk is outside of the quadrat.

Cover-abundance values are given for each of the species identified in the quadrat. The cover-abundance relates to the % cover that each species gives in the quadrat. The standard scale used is

- + cover <5%, few individuals
- 1 cover <5%, any number of individuals
- 2 cover 5-20%
- 3 cover 20-50%
- 4 cover 50-75%
- 5 cover 75-100%

The total cover in the quadrat can be well over 100%. For example, grasses, shrubs and trees could each give 100% cover, to give a total cover of 300%.

Notes should be taken about the site. Notes could include presence of dead trees and hollow limbs, fallen trees and limbs, rock outcrops, ground litter, lichen and moss, evidence of animal occupation, bare ground, ground disturbance, wet and marshy conditions, topography etc. A photograph of the site could also be taken.

Sometimes a count of trees present, and diameter at breast-height is also made.

If possible, permanent markers should be placed, so that the quadrat can be re-assessed at a later time.

Quadrats can be chosen to sample each of the main plant associations in a forest. They can also be chosen to include areas subject to regular burning or intensive timber-getting.

Quadrats are most easily carried out by a team. If you are willing to help, let me know, and we will arrange a time to begin. Working on a quadrat is interesting, and gives a new perspective on our bushland. It also helps in learning to identify plant species.

E. Perkins.

Sandon bird List for June

Australian Wood Duck
 Pacific Black Duck
 White-faced Heron
 Brown Falcon
 Masked Lapwing
 Galah
 Crimson Rosella
 Eastern Rosella
 Australian Owlet-nightjar (h)
 White-throated Tree-creeper
 Wren
 Striated Pardalote
 Weebill
 Brown,
 Buff-rumped,
 Yellow-rumped and
 Striated Thornbills
 Red Wattlebird
 Yellow-faced,
 White-eared (31/5),
 Yellow-tufted,
 Fuscous,

White-plumed,
 Brown-headed and
 White-naped Honeyeaters
 Jacky Winter
 Scarlet Robin
 Varied Sitella
 Golden Whistler (Imm)
 Grey Shrike-thrush
 Restless Flycatcher
 Australian Magpie-lark
 Grey Fantail
 Willie Wagtail
 Australian Magpie
 Grey Currawong
 Australian Raven
 White-winged Chough
 Diamond Fire-tail
 Welcome Swallow
 Silvereye

Susanna Starr

Pigs on Mount Alexander

(Information from Les Veering)

Two direct reports were made from late May/early June over a fortnight - one from Ollivers' Quarry and one about damage across Faraday Road.

Bendigo Game Club manned a drive on the Mount on the following weekend but did not make a sighting. Les believes that the strategy now will be to cease trying to shoot out the pigs as this makes them very wary. What will be tried will be to free feed the pigs until they are less wary, followed by poisoning and/or trapping. Reports of pig sightings and/or fresh damage should still be reported to Les or to Daryl Glover at Castlemaine Conservation Ph. 72 1110.

Contributed by Marg Hunter.

Bad News from New Zealand

A survey of New Zealand subantarctic islands indicates that penguin numbers are tumbling. The population of Erect-crested and Rockhopper Penguins have fallen dramatically.

Early photos taken in the 1920's show huge colonies of Rockhoppers where now only a handful of birds remain. Last year's counts in the breeding colonies came up with totals of 55,000 Erect-crested pairs compared to 115,000 in 1990 and Rockhoppers down to 4,000 pairs from 50,000 in 1990.

A quick calculation turns this into a decline of 52% and 92% respectively, catastrophic in anyone's terms

The outlook for penguins of that region seems bleak. If the current rate of decline continues Rockhoppers will become extinct in the New Zealand subantarctic within a few years. Similar declines have, as yet, not been detected outside the New Zealand region, but is that merely a question of time? Could it be due to the overharvesting of krill at the bottom of the food chain affecting the birds' food supply, along with sea temperature increases due to the Greenhouse effect?

Acknowledgements to "Forest and Bird" published in New Zealand.

Contributed C.M.

Observations for June

- * The Southern Boobook Owls at the Botanic Gardens are coming and going from their usual perch, as they did at this time last year. A possum's nest has appeared in the crown of their tree.
- * A pair of Spotted Pardalotes has been investigating the wall under the verandah at Fryers Road Chewton. L.R.
- * Again at Fryers Road Chewton, a Scrub Wren has taken up residence in a fernery and has been tapping continually (at its reflection?) on the bathroom window. L.R.
- * Orange-winged Sitellas seen in Fryers Rd. Chewton. L.R.
- * Orchids found flowering on 29/5 at Sandon - *Acianthus pusillus* (Small Mosquito Orchid), *Pterostylus alata* (Striped Greenhood). S.S.

- * Eastern Spinebill seen at Sandon on June 10. This is a new record for the block. The frothy blossoms of the local hakea are attracting lots of nectar-loving birds. S.S.
- * Last year two greenhood orchids appeared on the de Macchus property for the first time after seven years. At present there appear to be four species, some in clusters of 100 or so plants. N deM.
- * Numerous Grey Currawongs in Kaweka St. B.E.
- * Solitary White Ibis having trouble flying against the wind at Harcourt, and 40 Straw-necked Ibis settled in a Harcourt Paddock. B.E.
- * Two White Ibises at the dam in North Castlemaine. Has our lone friend found a mate perhaps? R.M.
- * White-faced Heron watching the sky intently where a predator was circling at Harcourt. B.E.
- * Fantail Cuckoo at Harcourt in the Oak Forest. B.E.
- * Toadstools in a Mornington garden are providing food for foxes - observed when a sensor light was triggered. F.D.
- * Wild pigs at Mount Alexander damaging quite large areas of ground, including steep slopes. I.P. (See article)
- * "Regret to announce two Indian Mynahs perching and making themselves heard at 64 Kennedy Street!" This is the first time Mynahs have been seen this side of the town centre. B.M.
- * A flock of White-naped Honeyeaters seen in Muckleford Forest 27/6. E.P.
- * A Rose Robin seen at Mount Alexander. I.P.
- * White-browed Babblers were seen nest building in Muckleford Forest 27/6. C.M.
- * A Flame Robin seen at Ellis Falls, Malmsbury, on the outing 15/6. M.O.
- * An unusual sighting for Harcourt - a large number of Pled Currawongs near the old school. B.E.
- * A first time for Norwrd Hill area was a large flock of Pled Currawongs. J.H.
- * Holly berries cleaned off within a week by very active Blackbirds. Owner indignant! G.B.
- * It was generally agreed that this has been a very heavy berrying Autumn.

For Identification

Margaret Dunn requested identification from two photos of a fungus found recently in her Walmer garden, and never observed before.

Description - 4"-5" in diameter, a cream blob deepening to orange-brown as it aged. It had a spongy texture, and had no apparant attachment to the ground. Any ideas?

(It sounds to me very much like Blackfellows Bread, a large edible puffball which only has a small attachment with the ground where it joins onto the mycelium under the ground. Ed.)

CASTLEMAINE F.N.C. PROGRAM

N.B. Excursions leave promptly at times stated.

General Meetings are held at Continuing Education, Templeton Street.

Fri July 12. **Some Birds of the Castlemaine District** Program by Club members. Continuing Ed. at 8.00pm. Chris Morris, local honeyeaters; George Broadway, cuckoos; Ern Perkins, thornbills; Brenda Envall, swallows and swifts; Rita Mills, frogmouths.

Sat July 13. **Mount Alexander** The new walking track for the agile, and Koala Park for others. Leaders E. Perkins and R. Mills.

Thurs July 25. **Thursday Birdwatching.** Meet Cont. Ed. 9.30 am.

Fri Aug 9. **Turkey and its Wildflowers.** Speaker is Hillary Weatherhead.

Sat Aug 10 **Walk along the Great Dividing Trail** between Spring Gully and Fryerstown. Leader M. Willis.

* Note - **Bookings** for the trip to Alan Reid's Property close on **Sept 13.**

→ Wed Sept 11 **Working Bee** pulling Cape Broom. Meet 9am, cr. Mary St and Froomes Road. Bring thick gloves.

Sat Sept 14 **Lockwood Forest** Leader E. Perkins.

Sat, Sun Oct 12 & 13 **Alan Reid's property**, Burns Road, Yea. See note p.7. May C.N. There is also room for camping and caravans.

Sat Nov 2 **Festival Walk.** 10am.

Fri Nov 8 **Plants of the Ballarat District** Speaker is Ern Perkins

Sat Nov 9 **Dead Horse Gully Walk.**

Sat Dec. 14. **Discovery walk** along Carisbrook/Baringhup road, (ap. 5-6km).

Committee: C. Morris (Pres.), G. Broadway (V.P.), M. Willis (Interim Sec.), B. Envall (Treas.), K. Turner, R.Mills (P.O. & N/L Ed.), E. Perkins, M. Oliver, B. Maund, J. Hewetson, M. Dredge.

Meetings:-

General - Second Friday every month (except Jan) at Continuing Education, Templeton St. at 8 pm.

Business - Held on the 4th Thursday every month (except Dec.) at 38 Campbell Street at 7.30pm. All Members are invited to attend.

Subscriptions - 1996

Ordinary Membership: single \$14 Family \$20

Pensioner/Student: Single \$10 Family \$16.

Supporting \$25

Newsletter posted: Membership + \$6

Vale Bob Webb

The club has been saddened to hear of Bob's death on the afternoon of Sunday June 30. The articles he wrote from time to time for the Newsletter were full of information and his dry humour. We will miss him. Our Sympathy goes to Susanna and his family.

Castlemaine Field Naturalists' Club Inc.

P.O. Box 324, Castlemaine, 3450.